

## Dialogue

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*“Vot Long Stret Man”: Personality, Policy, and the Election  
of Ralph Regenvanu, Vanuatu 2008*

BENEDICTA ROUSSEAU

*“We Were Still Papuans”: A 2006 Interview with Epeli Hau‘ofa*

NICHOLAS THOMAS

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A 2006 Interview with Epeli Hau‘ofa*

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*In April–May 2006 Epeli Hau‘ofa was in London with the Red Wave Collective, a group of painters from the Oceania Centre at the University of the South Pacific, who were exhibiting at the October Gallery. Epeli had asked me to speak at the opening, and he and I had a number of conversations, not least around Oceania, a major exhibition I was working on at that time, which was in many ways inspired by his writings. We anticipated that a statement of his, or a conversation with him, might introduce a catalog. This interview was recorded as a first step; it ranges over Epeli’s childhood, career, travels, and arguments. Changing institutional priorities led to the exhibition’s being cancelled soon afterward, but my sense was that our discussion remained interesting in many ways and was worth publishing. It contextualizes Hau‘ofa’s enormously influential 1993 essay, “Our Sea of Islands,” and his related arguments. Certain points here repeat statements made in those publications, but an important link emerges between a singular, migratory upbringing and early adult life, and a radical, genuinely regional imagination. There is little hard information here that will be new to anyone who knew Epeli, or to a reader of Geoffrey White’s excellent introduction to *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Hau‘ofa 2008).<sup>1</sup> But this is a personal and informal statement that I hope gives those who never knew Epeli some insight into his playfulness, creativity, and sources of inspiration and argument.*

*The title of this interview flags a biographic point that I would like to single out. If one historic process has transformed the Pacific over the last two hundred years it has been conversion to Christianity, which needless to say has meant different things in different places. Readers of this journal will be well aware that this was as much a project of Islanders as of white missionaries, and that male and female Islander “teachers” frequently led*

*or crucially supported the effort of evangelization in communities distant from their own. The commitments of Samoan, Tongan, Fijian, and other Polynesian missionaries in various parts of Melanesia resulted not only in religious change, but also in a certain cosmopolitanism, a mixing of Oceanic lives and experiences. Epeli was far from alone in being shaped by this, but it also underpinned his understanding and empowered the arguments of his later work. "As Epeli always said, 'the ocean connects us all rather than separates us'," John Pule recently remarked (in Thomas 2010, 32). Hau'ofa's upbringing and his experience as an adult in Melanesian milieus also gave him quite distinctive perspectives on the long-standing anthropological propensity to juxtapose Melanesia and Polynesia, and on actual and even profound cultural and historic differences that the distinction refracted and distorted.*

*Epeli passed away in January 2009. This interview is published in the hope that it will stimulate his successors and serve as a memorial to his imagination, candor, and wit.*

NT: Could you tell me a little about your childhood? I understand you were born in Misima?

EH: My parents were Tongan missionaries. They went to Papua New Guinea [PNG] in 1937 or 1938 and were caught up in the war there. I was born in 1939. What is interesting about my upbringing is that up until I was seven or eight I did not know that I was a Tongan. Our parents never talked about Tonga and never spoke Tongan to each other. I grew up as a Papuan. In 1947, suddenly, my parents talked about going back to Tonga. To me, the place had no meaning whatsoever. All the people I knew were Papuans and I was just one of them. We lived on a typical mission station run by white missionaries. Island missionaries from Sāmoa and Tonga made the link between them and the local people. I think the main reason why they sent Island missionaries to Papua New Guinea is that they could relate more easily to the local people.

We left in September 1947. All the Island missionaries who were in Papua New Guinea at the time went back together, about forty families of Fijians, Tongans, and Samoans. It took us about two years to get to Tonga. We first stayed in Madang for about six months, waiting for transportation to Australia. We got to know the people in Madang and picked up the pidgin language. I spoke Misimin and Dobuan. Dobuan was the lingua franca for the area. We flew to Australia—Cooktown or Cairns—

in some old World War II airplanes and got stuck in Townsville. From Townsville they took us to Magnetic Island, to some abandoned army barracks. We stayed there for another six months and got to know the local people. We eventually found our way down to Sydney and stayed there for a few months. Finally, they took us across to Fiji on the *Catalina*, via New Caledonia. We arrived in Tonga in January 1949.

While we were traveling, we all spoke Dobuan. We were still Papuans. In Tonga, I felt a complete foreigner and was treated as such. My parents went back to Papua New Guinea. I wanted to leave because home was where my parents were. But I stayed in Tonga for seven years, between 1949 and 1955, and went to primary school. I learned the language but never really got into the culture of the country. Somehow, I found my way to a family in the capital who were friendly with my mother, and stayed there. The important thing about my time in Tonga is that I got myself to take the identity as a Tongan. However, Tongans still called me a Papuan. I never got into the heart of the culture. I spent most of my time in a boarding school, so I missed the normal community life of the country.

When I finished school there I went to Fiji to a Methodist school, Lelean Memorial School, and I re-identified myself in Fiji. It was a very good experience, four years of schooling there, with Fijian boys. I didn't go to Fijian villages, just to the boarding school. It was the main Methodist center for education: the usual secondary school thing but also Bible training.

After that, I went to the University of New England, Armidale, New South Wales. The Papuan government gave a scholarship, which enabled me to go from Fiji to Australia. There was already some Fijians there, because my principal at Lelean Memorial School had a brother who was a Methodist minister in Armidale. At the time, in 1960, very few Islanders had gone overseas for schooling. I went there as a Fijian and everyone there—and still today if I meet up with old Armidalians—considered me a Fijian. In Australia I studied history. I had always been interested in narrative things. By the time I went to Australia I wanted to be a writer, because at school in Fiji we were made to read Conrad and Melville—the romance of the sea, fantastic! Our final year at Lelean Memorial School, we read an abridged *Moby-Dick* for our Senior Cambridge examination. We loved it. The whole book was read to us by a teacher, and it was like story telling in the Pacific. The books we had to read at school were read out to us by our teachers. It made it closer to the narrative worlds that we grew up in. You had both the literature and the oral aspects. To me, *Moby-Dick* and Joseph Conrad's sea stories were fantastic. They made me want to write.

At the end of my final year at Lelean Memorial School, the principal said, “What are you going to do?” and I said, “I want to be a sailor, I want to go like Melville and then write.” So he sent me to Armidale, which is up in the mountains, over two hundred miles from the sea, and I grew up there with this bunch of Fijians.

When I finished my education in Australia, I got a scholarship to go to McGill University, in Canada, to do sociology. I wasn’t aware of anthropology; there was no anthropology at the University of New England. I chose sociology because I had done my honors research for my undergraduate degree in the Mitchell Library and archives in Australia. After three months there, I got out and said, “Never again! I’m not going to be a historian and spend my life hooked up in archives.” Sociology and its language were so alien to me. Fortunately, at McGill, anthropology and sociology were combined in one department. I could not make anything out of sociology so Dick Salisbury, who was head of the department at the time, advised me to try anthropology. I had no theoretical background in anthropology but it fascinated me. I was attracted to people who wrote anthropology, such as Ruth Benedict, and studies of peasant societies in Europe. I did five months of fieldwork in Trinidad, where I was introduced to the works of V S Naipaul. While in Trinidad, I read everything that he had written up to that time. His early novels were the funniest I ever read, and that had an influence later on, in the way that I wrote.

After completing my master’s at McGill in 1968, I applied for a job at the University of Papua New Guinea [UPNG], which had been established in 1966. It was a senior tutor position in the anthropology department.

NT: So were you always planning to go back to PNG? Did you want to make that your home, rather than staying in Canada or Australia, somewhere?

EH: At the time I wasn’t thinking about staying overseas. My thought was always to go back. Like other Pacific people at that time, we were trained to be of service to our community, rather than to look out for ourselves. That notion of service was very important in our Methodist upbringing. So I didn’t at that time think about going overseas. I had to go back home and I wasn’t so sure where home was. But my family was still in Papua New Guinea, so I applied for the job at the UPNG.

Ulli and Georgina Beier had just arrived there about a year or so before me. They were responsible for the birth of the new contemporary arts in Papua New Guinea. Georgina working with artists and Ulli Beier working

with writers.<sup>2</sup> I told you that I wanted to be a writer. Ulli started a group of writers but I was a bit afraid to go to him. He was a big, impressive man. He walked around wearing these Nigerian robes. Because I was a tutor in anthropology I didn't dare go to him and say, "Let me start writing," but I was fascinated by what he and Georgina were doing there and that was something that influenced very much what I am doing now [at the Oceania Centre]. I taught for two and a half years at UPNG and then applied for a PhD scholarship at ANU [the Australian National University]. I did my fieldwork among the Mekeo. I was going to go back to Papua New Guinea, but my parents retired and returned to Tonga. There was no family left there, so I thought I would go back to Tonga for two years and then return to Papua New Guinea. But something was kindled in Tonga, so I stayed for seven years. I revised my thesis for publication and somehow I started writing fiction. I went back to Tonga on a joint project between ANU and USP [University of the South Pacific] and I took the Tongan side of that research for two years. Why I didn't leave Tonga at that time was because I started writing fiction, and I was very interested in what was going on there, so I stayed there for seven years and then moved to Suva.

NT: The period when you were doing your doctorate was also very much the lead-up to decolonization in PNG, and that had a big impact on the intellectual and cultural milieu. Internationally, there was a lot of criticism of anthropology and colonialism in that context. How did you feel about that at that particular time?

EH: That is really interesting because when I was at university in Papua New Guinea they were preparing the country for self-government. We knew that the people we were teaching were going to be the leaders of the country. I remember when we went to school they said, "You are the future leaders." All of us teaching at UPNG knew that we were dealing with young people who were going to be leaders of the country, such as Rab-bie Namaliu. The environment there was the right environment for the development of the independence party, the Pangu Party. But I was never political.

I went to ANU, I did my fieldwork, and I began questioning the role of anthropology. With this move toward independence, and in my little way, I looked at anthropology. I have never worked as a professional anthropologist teaching anthropology as such. There were two things I found out about anthropology at the time. There was a lot of bandwagoning:

people jumped onto the Lévi-Straussian bandwagon, and then Chomsky came. At ANU, human ethology developed, and Derek Freeman was our leader. To me, anthropology at that level was too far above the things that I was interested in, the ordinary life of people. But the thing in anthropology that lasted was the fieldwork training, ethnography. I still consider myself as an ethnographer of some sort. My fieldwork in the West Indies and Papua New Guinea and two years of trying to do something in Tonga were very important, as a social observer.

The other thing in anthropology that I liked very much was talking to anthropologists. That was fascinating for me, conversations with anthropologists. We would tell each other stories that never came out in our books, fascinating stories about fieldwork, field situations. It was a disturbed time at ANU. The department was led by Derek Freeman. Then Roger Keesing came, bringing his very smart Harvard crowd. I felt left out of that anthropology. The narrative anthropology that I read belonged to the old style, people like Ruth Benedict, who was by then out of fashion, or Margaret Mead, who was one of the greatest communicators at that time.

NT: Because that's always been a strand of anthropology: the business of going somewhere and then telling the story of what that society is like . . .

EH: I was fascinated by stories that anthropologists told and stories that they would not write. Just before I finished, in 1975, there was a meeting of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, and I was asked to give a paper. I wrote a paper called "Anthropology and Pacific Islanders" [Hau'ofa 1975]. It was a critique of what we anthropologists were doing in the Pacific, in Melanesia in particular. Among other things, I said we don't see people as people. If you look at what we have written, one of the most important things for me in the Pacific is laughter: you never see that in any of our anthropology writing. I had a go then at Marshall Sahlins, big men and rich men and the distortion. . . . After the paper, Marie Reay came up to me. She was joking, but I think she was serious—she said, "You're biting the hand that feeds you."

I went back to Tonga after that and got a job. I felt hamstrung by the way that you had to write things, observing the rules of the discipline. I could not write the important things about my experience in the Pacific as an anthropologist. Then one day, just like that, I got the inspiration. I went home and started writing a piece of fiction.

Going back to the notion of identity and being a person of one place: I would not have developed the things that I'm doing now without that wider Pacific background. When I started working in USP, I moved out again to other countries of the Pacific, right through the twelve countries of the USP region. I know that I am a Tongan by ancestry and people have to define me as that. But I can't get away with it. I can't be a full Tongan because I don't have that root of one's own life when you're growing up in the country. I could have developed it in Papua New Guinea but I was uprooted too early. But I think it was a fortunate thing. Working at the University of South Pacific strengthened that.

NT: Surely one of the interesting things about USP was—and is—the affiliated countries cutting across the Melanesian/Polynesian divide. So it must have been and still is a different cultural mix to, say, what you get with the contemporary Pacific artists in New Zealand, who are Samoans, Tongans, Cook Islanders, Niueans, and so on.

EH: At USP, there is still very much a national sense. My upbringing in Melanesia was very important. I am extremely sensitive to Polynesian cultures and the contemporary situation and modernization, but they are rather dominant. Always, when I went to Tonga, I found that the way Polynesians feel and think about Melanesians rather appalling. It's racist. There is a feeling of superiority. Because part of me is Melanesian, I'm always trying to go beyond that divide.

I think we, at USP, have not taken advantage of our location where Polynesians, Micronesians, and Melanesians are mixing. That, to me, is the most important thing that we have. We have an advantage over New Zealand. They call themselves "Pacific this," "Pacific that," but really, it is Polynesia.

NT: Contemporary Pacific art has had an uneven history. Both the literature and the visual art that the Beiers were supporting in PNG seemed very conspicuous in the 1970s, of course, because of the enthusiasm around independence. But wider interest then seemed to lapse, to be revived in the '90s, in part because of what was going on in New Zealand. But I'm speaking from an Australian perspective, and I wondered how this history struck you?

EH: I was in Papua New Guinea at that period, the late '60s and early '70s. It was vibrant. It brought up something in Papua New Guinea that I have not seen anywhere else. One thing that stayed with me is the capac-



ity of Melanesia to draw on the breadth and diversity of their cultures. At university, I was fascinated with the Melanesian cultural environment. Polynesian cultures have been so influenced by westernization, much more than in Melanesia. Even in Fiji, the most fascinating aspects of Fijian culture to me are on the Melanesian side. We have there at USP this fantastically rich cultural environment to draw on.

In Fiji, the aspect of Fiji that is the chiefly system—Polynesian-like—was very strong. But what we're doing in Suva has drawn out other aspects. Fijians don't come forward, they hold themselves back, they are a bit reticent about things. This is partly because of the system but also because of being anxious to protect their identity from other influences: within Fiji, you have the thing between Fijians and Indians. But I think, in order to protect their identity, Fijians have maintained some very interesting old stuff. To me, the most fascinating ceremony that I've seen in the Pacific is the full Fijian kava ceremony. It's magnificent. At USP, we are trying to draw on that old stuff. For the young Fijians who are with us, the Oceania Centre for Arts and Culture [at USP] provides that freedom. Thinking about chants, for example: the old chants in Polynesia have virtually gone. The Tongans, the Maori, and the Hawaiians have still preserved some, but not to the degree that the Melanesians have preserved theirs. At the Oceania Centre, we are drawing on some fantastic, most interesting new stuff from Melanesia.

NT: Could I change tack and ask about your "Our Sea of Islands" essay and the wider statement? You talked about being in a fairly pessimistic frame of mind about the Pacific, and various things happening that prompted you to turn your way of thinking around—I understand in part one of Marshall Sahlins's lectures that suggested Pacific Islanders have more of a capacity to shape their own histories. Could you say a bit about that?

EH: When I joined the sociology department I was assigned to teach Pacific courses. At that time the way the Pacific had been portrayed outside these small islands emphasized their dependence on powerful nations. After independence, there was a lot of disappointment. Our leaders were not up to the task. There was corruption and tribalism. I told my students, "It's a fairly bleak view of the Islands." As I said in my article, the faces of my students affected me. One day someone asked me, "What can we do?" There was no answer. It really affected me because I realized that we couldn't do much. I then met Marshall Sahlins. We went out for lunch and

I told him what was happening and he said, “Not all is lost.” That to me was the crucial thing, when he said, “Not all is lost,” in a typical Sahlins kind of way. Right then I decided to see what kind of perspective I should look for. I said to myself: “We must do something about this dominant view of the Islands.”

Not long after that I was invited to Hawai‘i to give talks in Kona and Hilo [in March and April 1993]. I had already prepared a paper for Kona but the Hilo lecture was just forming. I went to Kona to the annual meeting of the Association of Social Anthropologists of Oceania and gave a paper there. Then someone drove me across to Hilo. I had not written the paper. I was sitting there watching the surroundings. It’s magnificent; it’s the most spectacular landscape. We went to Kilauea and went down to where the lava was flowing. The guy who drove me said, “Look at that, that’s land forming.” So I actually saw the process of growth, the lava. It sets and you can see there is a new formation, new land—a kind of a primeval thing. Something clicked in my mind. That’s when it became clear what I was going to do. When we got to Hilo that night I started writing the paper, longhand, right through the following day. When they came to pick me up, I was just on my last bit. I got a bit carried away. That was the origin of “Sea of Islands” and “The Ocean in Us,” where I advocated the development of an Oceanic identity. They formed the basis of what I did later on, including the development of the Oceania Centre when the university assigned me to start it.

NT: There seems to be a clear connection between those essays and the establishment of the center. You were also making a move from sociology to running a cultural institute.

EH: The university was, at that time, not interested in the ancient culture. I sensed from the staff that culture was blamed for all kinds of things, especially after the coup in Fiji and the rise of Fijian nationalism and also other things happening elsewhere. The traditional culture was considered a dangerous thing that hinders adherence to the culture of progress, of liberalism and democracy and all that, and this was the culture the university was interested in.

The university had a program in integrated arts since it began. That was for teaching art teachers, and it taught perfunctorily. There was nothing left in terms of creativity. The council decided that the university must have a program in arts and culture, specifically to be modeled on the Poly-

nesian Cultural Center in Hawai'i. I was appointed chairman of the committee to do something about it.

NT: Was there an expectation that it would do very commercial things for tourists?

EH: It was supposed to be for tourists. The development was to be based on the Polynesian Cultural Center [Lā'ie, Hawai'i], one of the biggest operations of its kind in the world. When I was appointed to start it, I wasn't going to do anything like that. When the university appointed me, they didn't even have a program. It was an opportunity for me to put into action what I had been talking about: that, ultimately, we had to develop an Oceanic identity. Some people were afraid that it might replace the other identities. It is not true. It adds something else on top of what we have. It was one of our main answers to develop contemporary forms that transcend our diversities in Oceania.

NT: When you started out, did you see that mostly as a literature thing or mostly music, dance, theatre?

EH: Literature was out because the department of literature and language was handling that. It was in the area of visual and the performing arts. The university gave me a good deal of freedom. I don't expect to see results in my lifetime, only to lay the foundation for the future. Whether people in the future will carry on, I don't know. But I hope so.

We have started something that seems to have a good prospect. In the dance area we have a Samoan guy [Allan Alo] who is chief choreographer. He's very talented. In music, it's a Solomon Islands guy [Calvin Rore]. It was not a deliberate thing to diversify the cultures. It just happened. Someone cropped up. When the Samoan guy started, it was very much Samoan and Polynesian, but now he's extended fantastically, using things from all over the Pacific and different kinds of movements. The same thing happened with the Solomon Islands guy. I put out the word some time ago that we needed someone to come and help with our recording. He turned out to be a brilliant sound recorder and musician. Our last recording is the revival of the nose flute, which only three or four people are still playing in Tonga. The thing with Tongans is that they have such reverence for their traditions that they have maintained only two tunes from then and never explored the potential of the nose flute. But this Solomon Islands guy is free to explore because he's not being tied in by these traditions.

NT: So do you think this cosmopolitanism of people coming together from different parts of the Pacific also frees people from having to do a particular thing the way they would at home?

EH: Very much so. What we want to do is create a Pacific space to enable these people to explore. There are two very important elements to the center. The first one is the freedom for the artists to express themselves, because their communities, as you know, are very restricting. The pressure for conformity is strong, so we try to give these people a Pacific environment in which they are free to express themselves through their work. Fortunately, the university gave me the freedom to build such a place, and that's how we have been able to build something with the freedom that the creative minds need to innovate.

NT: You said there were two differences . . .

EH: And also the freedom to express themselves and innovate. Innovation is very important to stop us from reproducing the same things. One of the things I have seen in the Pacific, because of the pressure for conformity, is that we tend to reproduce the same old dances, the same old carvings. The center is a place of regional creativity in which we must always experiment, develop things. We have to continue the process of innovation, so that we don't get held down by carving cannibal forks all the time to sell to the tourists. I think the values from the West are essential for creativity. Developing a specific space that is Pacific is also very important if you are going to develop arts that are Pacific! If you try to do that in an environment that is alien you will develop something else. I think one of the problems we had in the development of arts in the university in the last few years was that it was the wrong environment. As part of their university courses, they were only taught fine arts for half a semester. It was completely the wrong setting for that. So a specific setting, a specific space, the freedom to express oneself, and also a policy for innovation, I think those are essential if you're going to develop Oceanic art, new forms of expression that are ours.

NT: It's become easier to travel around the Pacific, which I suppose helps your project, but against that there have been growing political difficulties, and there remain deep divisions, say, separating the francophone colonies from the rest of the Pacific. Do you think people are coming closer together or are they getting further apart? Is there a struggle to try and

create a sort of Oceanic community, and do you think that's possible at least among artists, if not the population as a whole?

EH: I never thought that this is going to be everywhere. There is no way. I believe that any change starts with very small groups and you build up things that will, in time, if they're any good, take off. I'm very much aware of those difficulties, in particular the division into francophone and anglophone in the Pacific. Though we've had contact with the Kanaks—there has been some development there, although slow. We've got the New Caledonians over and we went over to New Caledonia. There have been workshops and performances. So there's something going on there and our artists are going to the Tjibaou Centre. It's a beginning and I think all we can do now is just hope for the best. I have no illusions whatsoever that I personally will see an Oceanic identity, but we build something with the hope that it might take off in the future.

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## Notes

1 For a range of useful perspectives, see also the tributes published in a previous issue of this journal (22:101–122).

2 For the Beiers' influential advocacy of modern, independent art and literature in Papua New Guinea, see Beier 2005. After the establishment of the Oceania Centre at the University of the South Pacific, Georgina Beier visited and ran workshops; she also designed the center's logo.

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